Hyderabad

Published: 01st September 2021

This publishing house in Hyderabad is rekindling the love for Telugu literature in kids. This is their story

A visit to Manchi Pustakam, a children's publishing house, could turn into a journey of exploring love of stories, the delight to be had in children's literature and reading in Telugu, for anyone

Seema Rajpal
Edex Live

K Suresh and P Bhagyalakshmi | (Pic: S Senbagapandiyan)

No one could ask for a better welcome than the unmistakably musky, sweet smell of books. So when it wafts towards you as you enter the office of **Manchi Pustakam**, make sure you take a deep breath and soak it all in. Before being surrounded by colourful books makes you go weak in the knees, quickly focus on the effervescent smiles of **K Suresh**, Trustee and **P Bhagyalakshmi**, Coordinator who are ready to talk about books at any given point.

If you are lucky, you'll be served green tea with lemon sourced straight from their own office backyard while you sit down for a chat, just like we were! Situated in a beautiful blue building which is tucked away in one of the many sidelines of Hyderabad's Tarnaka, in a world where reading and reading habits are changing fast, the office is a fortress that houses original,

translated and bilingual books only and only in Telugu and bats for old school way of falling in love with reading for children.

But first, some history. Before Manchi Pustakam there was Bala Sahithi in the late 1980s, where, convinced by the fact that there was a lack of publishing houses offering books in Telugu, four good folks — including the husband-wife duo — started by collecting about 40 titles and setting up stalls in exhibitions. Manchi Pustakam came only in 2004, and is now a trust that is dedicated to their crusade. It was only in the later years that K Suresh left his government job in the Agriculture Department and started working for the publication house full-time.

Books for the win

There is no 'Moral of the story'

On a sailing ship, when an in-house monkey flees after taking a boy's hat, it leaves it on one of the spokes of the ship jutting out towards the sea. In an attempt to retrieve the hat, the boy falls down only to be rescued later by one of the sailors.

The above story is a supremely abridged version of a story penned by Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, specifically for children. The book we hold in our hand is called *L Tolstoy: Stories for Children* and is perhaps the first Telugu edition of it. "Tolstoy, while translating *Aesop's Fables*, famously

trimmed out all those lines alluding to the moral of the story. What lesson they wanted to learn from the story, or not, was left to the children," says the very knowledgeable Suresh, who has a personal collection of about 150 children's books from the Soviet Era from publishers like Raduga Publishers and Progress Publishers.

Before starting the publishing house, K Suresh and Ravindra Babu, his friend, worked with WASSAN (Watershed Support Services and Activities Network). That’s how they built their network

---

Tolstoy's approach is right up Manchi Pustakam's ally because they vehemently believe that, "Morals are not taught, they are caught." Expanding upon their core philosophy, Suresh ventures on to say, "That is one reason why we were having trouble finding Telugu writers for children — everyone wanted to moralise stories. Even parents are on the lookout for either moral stories or biographies for their children to 'learn' from. When we make this a compulsory criteria, we are robbing children of their joy of reading and narrowing their perspectives rather than opening it up to the different angles the story stands for." In that way, from the story of Harishchandra (the king who always told the truth even at the cost of great peril), children could learn that always telling the truth can get them into trouble. "In a way, children are faced with existential questions too like 'Who am I?' 'What is the purpose of being good or bad in life?' They need to resolve those questions on their own," he establishes.

Stories from around the world

In Afghanistan, a grandmother struggles to send her granddaughter to school in *Nasreen's Rahsya Patasala* (Nasreen's Secret School). A girl afflicted with cancer ten years after the nuclear bomb attack at Hiroshima tried to make a 1,000 paper cranes but passed away much before in Sadacko Kagita Pakshulu (*Sadacko's Paper Cranes*).

Telugu language preservation is a larger cause with many advocates, but what Manchi Pustakam aims to do is create an interest in reading Telugu books and increasing reading capacity — and all their energies are directed towards doing so in children. Over the years, there have been many initiatives taken by this zealous publishing house in this direction. For example, coming out with a low-priced edition of ten books with 16 pages each costing just Rs 80. Six of these sets have been published with alluring stories like *Nasreen's Rahsya Patasala, Sadacko Kagita Pakshulu* and many international-flavored stories. As we hold them in our hand, we note the simple black and white illustrations, which can serve as a canvas for children to colour, with a paper for the book cover. Then there is a set of 50 reading cards, each with four pages. "These initiatives are particularly directed at those parents who would like children to learn to read in Telugu and the feedback we have received confirms this," informs the publisher.

The duo **K Suresh** and **P Bhagyalakshmi**

As a translator, Suresh used to frown upon the number of English words used in Telugu writing — caru (car), busu (bus) and so on, he points out the 'adopted words'. "I would not agree when people would say 'school' instead of the Telugu word for it, 'badi'. But now, if we ask children, *Em badi?* (Which school?), I don't know how many of them will understand. I fear that soon, phrases like *manchi neelu* (water) will fall out of usage too,"

rues the publisher who was born in Kurumaddali, a village in the Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh. Now they publish titles like *Nanagari Paperu* (Father's newspaper) because the tides have turned, and yet, one must note that they are still swimming against the tide in different ways. The extremely reasonably priced books, starting from as low as Rs 25, is just one of the factors.

What children have to say

A girl says *Nenu kadu* (not me) whenever she is asked if she was up to any mischief. At the end, when they ask if she is a good girl, she ends up saying *Nenu kadu* again, only to realise and correct herself just in time.

One of the very first books published under their name was The Mouse and The Pencil by V Sutayev from Progress Publishers

---

Having published more than 600 books, most of which were translations, and having touched about Rs 45 lakh per year in revenue in the pre-COVID days, in 2017, Manchi Pustakam decided to call for original stories for children by both children and adults. This bi-annual contest was carried out with the help of TANA (Telugu Association of North America) and in 2017, 11 novels were published. The year 2019 saw five novels. This year, they plan to come out with ten original picture books, one of which is *Nenu Kadu*, and all of them are written by children, and will be hot off the press this week. "I am particularly happy with the stories we received this year. One of them spoke about an E-asylum for those addicted to smartphones — very sci-fi," says a delighted K Suresh.

All of Manchi Pustakam's sales happen online now, exhibitions and book fairs, especially the popular Hyderabad Book Fair, were where they made most of their sales, including bulk orders for many organisations. But visiting the office and striking a conversation with K Suresh, a talk

interspersed with several stories straight from their storybooks, is the best way to make your purchase. Because then, when you walk out of the office, you don't just walk out with new best friends AKA books, like we walked out with one English title *The Man Who Planted Trees* by French author Jean Giono, but you'll also carry with you a newly awakened love for reading.

For more on them check out manchipustakam.in